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ABSTRACT

Forensics programs can be laboratories for small group processes, whether or not they are explicitly recognized by either the participants or their teachers. Small group dynamics, as identified by M. Shaw (1981), are present and clearly define the forensic activity as a small group experience. The combination of being a small group, spending extended amounts of time together, longitudinal requirements, the presence of a teacher probably trained in small group communication, and the focus of the activity on communication create a unique experience and setting for the forensics laboratory not found elsewhere. The six models offered by T. Mills in 1967 (the quasi-mechnical, organismic, conflict, equilibrium, structural-functional, and cybernetic growth models) provide ample illustrations of how common forensic team practices can be easily incorporated into any of a number of small group perspectives. The cybernetic growth model--which looks at the primary role of feedback to the system and sees the group as the agent for developing and responding to feedback--would seem because of its sophistication and completeness to be the best model for teachers who wish to make a conscientious decision to make their program a laboratory for small group communication. (PRA)

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Forensics as a Laboratory Experience

in

Small Group Communication

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Introduction

The notion of approaching a forensics program as a laboratory for small group communication is certainly not any more original or new than the idea of discussing forensics as a training group for leadership or for research skills, or for the development of critical thinking. Each of these ideas has been used formally and informally to justify the activity to decision-makers and to counter critics who decry the costs or values of such programs.

This paper will try to add to that part of the discussion which concerns the small group interaction and training students are likely to receive through participation in organized, competitive forensics.

Beginning with a definition of both forensics and small group, this paper will discuss the connections between the two, and relate the notion of "small group" to definition of "teams." The unique situation of the forensics team will be examined and then the organizing taxonomy of Mills' six models for analyzing and studying groups will be applied to the forensic program to indicate how a teacher might identify and apply the small group elements at work in a typical forensic program.

Definitions

The standard definition of <u>forensics</u> has been provided by the National Developmental Conference on Forensics in 1974, "Forensics

is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people....forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts and with a variety of audiences."[1] These events have sometimes included one called "discussion" although that one has fallen almost completely out of the scene with the exception of the annual "National Discussion Contest." For purposes of this paper the definition is taken to include the entire program, not just the "events." An interesting note here at the beginning, is that forensic educators see themselves as providing <u>laboratories</u> for helping students through the events to become more competent communicators. Adding small group communication skills to this list of competencies seems an easy and perhaps implied extension or application of this definition.

Anyone who has ever been even briefly associated with a forensics program will be able to sense the <u>small group</u> nature of the activity. The qualities of small group interaction are clear: the numbers are right, the motivation to remain part of group is present, goals are usually overt, there exists an organization of roles, there is interdependence, and the participants certainly perceive themselves to be part of a group. In fact, these exact qualities were identified by small group researcher Marvin Shaw as the defining components of a small group.[2] The immediate face-to-

face quality of practice sessions, competition and social interactions makes the forensic participant a small group member from the moment they become involved in the activity. While it is possible for a contestant to prepare individually, practice with just an instructor, travel to and from a contest site alone, interact with no one during a tournament, such a person is virtually unheard of on any forensic team, and probably would not last long in the activity.

Is there any value in drawing a distinction between the forensics interaction as a small group as opposed to calling it a "team?" Some researchers have made a minor distinction, with the term "group" indicating the more general concept, while "team" is simply a specialized type of group.[3] For example, Larson and LaFasto define a team as having "two or more people; it has a specific ... goal to be attained; and coordination of activity among the members...is required for the attainment of the ...goal."[4] Certainly the narrow example of a single two-person debate meets this definition, but the interaction among all the participants who debate, and their instructors, would seem to pull in the broader concepts from the original Shaw qualities. Again, the team is a subset of the group. A final example of the notion that teams integrate into groups is seen the definition offered by Dyer: "teams represent a collection of people who must collaborate, to some degree, to achieve common goals..."[5]

So the notions of small group and forensic team seem to mesh regardless of which perspective is used as the starting point. The

expanded nature of a forensics program is the most viable definition for this discussion, although it does put the emphasis on the interactions which surround the competitive events, rather than the events themselves. Since you can't get to the events without first going through the ancillary activities - team meetings, work sessions, long drives, practice rounds - this programmatic approach seems justified. In addition, the unique opportunities of team or group focused on communication activities delineates this activity from others. While a football or swimming or dance or even chess team probably could be viewed profitably from the small groups perspective, the unique combination of having communication events provides the forensics educator with a potential laboratory experience not open to others. With the type of background preparation provided by most broadly designed undergraduate majors in Speech Communication, directors of forensics programs should have training in the major facets of small group communication. The standard appeals offered in support of any collegiate team activity usually include the development of leadership and perhaps the creation of teamwork experiences. These are often claimed as having "real world" transfer benefits, and could be used by a variety of contest groups. In addition to all of those benefits, however, forensics can add the ability to use the principles of good communication as an aid in both the interactions which pertain to any group or club, and the content of the events practiced. For this reason, the entire sense of the "forensics program" will be included, so that both the situations

where a group of debaters or readers theatre participants work together on the preparation and presentation of a contest event, and the social situations which surround that preparation and presentation can be included as an extended "laboratory." Add to this mix a teacher who may well be trained in small group procedures, and a unique blend is created for an educational experience. Instead of taking the standard approach of leadership and team building, the expanded notion of laboratory may benefit from more encompassing views.

Now that the definitional context is presented, the application of Mills' six models of small group communication will show the variety of ways in which forensics programs can be approached from small group perspectives. Mills' perspectives were selected because they are commonly taught in introductory small group courses, and thus may be familiar to a wide spectrum of persons who find themselves directing forensics programs.

Mills' Models and Forensics

Mills' six models are an organizing framework to summarize and conceptualize the ways small group researchers have approached their study.[6] Virtually any piece of research done on small groups could be placed into one of these categories based upon the assumptions about the nature of small groups operating in the research. The six ways people have viewed small groups include: 1. The quasi-mechanical model; 2. the organismic model; 3. the conflict model; 4. the equilibrium model; 5. the structural-functional model; and 6. the cybernetic-growth model. Each of

these will be discussed in terms of their application to the world of forensics programs. The first five will be briefly covered due to their somewhat limited value, while the sixth one will be covered in greater detail because of its integrative and explanatory power.

The quasi-mechanical model means that small groups are approached as if they were machines with various parts and functions. Actions of the group are categorized and quantified so that group dynamics becomes a somewhat detached, mathematical proposition. It assumes that people are interchangeable parts in this grand engine, and that individual personality or differences are not significant to its functioning. Readily, most communicologists reject this notion, and, if pressed, so would most directors of forensics.

Yet forensics programs do exhibit some quasi-mechanical qualities, and may function at times from this perspective. Is one member a debate team ill? Well, just unplug that name from the entry and plug in a spare. Two teams = 1 judge required. The van will hold seven, it does not matter which seven ride in van #1 and which other seven ride in van #2. Perhaps directors of forensic programs wish their small groups were more like a machine, but experience tells us that some combinations work for a team, others do not, some van rides are more pleasant than others.

The organismic model refers to seeing the group function similar to a biological organism. Birth, life, death cycles are seen the formation of the group, its development and activities,

and finally its dissolution. Analogy may be made to various biological functions and systems as a small group divides up roles and tasks.

While forensics participants would probably jump at the opportunity to select certain individuals from the group and assign them an anatomical equivalent, the overall notion of a team coming together at the first meeting, evolving, growing through the season, and ending with a final activity of the year is perhaps more what small group researchers had in mind with this model. The term, "forensic season" further connects the activity to the biological analogy. Even a tournament has a "life-cycle." Anyone wishing to use this perspective to describe the forensics laboratory would find quick and obvious applications, but ultimately these applications become limited because they depend on rough analogy. A limited insight into both small group interaction and the forensics activity comes from this perspective.

Closer to the mark may be the conflict model. Mills identifies the assumption behind this perspective as seeing the group as an endless series of conflicts. The small group studies in this area look at the tensions between independence and interdependence, between individual values and group norms. Conflicts become the staple interaction. This perspective looks mainly at the divisive factors which operate in small groups, while ignoring other pressures such as belongingness or inclusion or conformity needs.

Breathes there a forensic teacher who could not classify a program from the conflict perspective? Conflicts are endless - whose case should we run? Who gets to speak in which position? Should I change my program? That judge hates me. Who gets to drive, room with whom, show up at the library, or go to which tournament? Each of these questions is an opportunity for group conflict. If the forensics program allows the group to be part of the decision-making process, then that program is functioning as a laboratory for small groups in the conflict model for at least part of the time. If the instructor makes most of the policy decisions without consulting the group, there will still be personal conflicts which the team may handle outside the purview of the instructor. The obvious shortcoming is that most small groups do more than have conflict. They also cooperate, change, provide positive interactions for at least part of their interactions.

The equilibrium model work from a perspective of balance. People familiar with Hieder's work, or cognitive dissonance will recognize this perspective. Small groups have a normal state of balance or equilibrium, so conflict is viewed as aberrant, and any episodes of conflict are followed by efforts to restore order and reestablish interpersonal harmony.

Again, some measure of this model can be useful in looking at what the forensics activity can teach students about small group behavior. When there is a team disagreement, the debaters still needs to compete together the next round. If there is going to be

a successful readers theatre team, there needs to be sufficient tolerance or harmony so their work will be smooth and integrated. Even on the personal level, some measure of harmony needs to be apparent on multi-hour drives to and from tournaments. The small group can be an agent working towards equilibrium by inducing elements of peer pressure and conformity. The member who may be the source of the conflict and unwilling to harmonize, may find the rest of the group banding together to produce either the desired change in behavior, or to exclude the affronting person from the group. Teachers in forensics programs are frequently presented with requests to "do something about" individuals who are continuous sources of tension and conflict in the group. Such teachers who wish to emphasize the small group laboratory nature of the activity can take that opportunity to discuss these pressures for conformity, and will be using an equilibrium perspective as they do so.

The structural-functional model may at first seem similar to the mechanistic approach. This model, however, is dynamic in that it sees the group as adapting to new demands to meet evolving goals. It assumes the goal is what motivates the group, and that individual members will take on and alter roles and functions as those changes are dictated by goal achievement demands. Group maintenance behaviors become important, and some members will engage in identifying, assigning or taking on task behaviors to keep the group on its path. This perspective assumes that members

can learn from their interactions, and develop or take on a variety of roles as needed.

A good model for the forensics small group, this perspective would be operating when people shift jobs or responsibilities in the team as needed to help the team survive and develop. For example, one person may be doing "all the research" for the team (a common complaint -- for those who have never coached a debate program), and the task of the team is to develop a new function for the person who may not be contributing. Sometimes teams will chart out jobs, and various persons will volunteer or be assigned to function in one or more of these jobs in order to help the entire group. These jobs may be as simple as going to find a specific item of research or a certain literary selection, to more complex roles such as keeping a master file of evidence or developing a extemp file. If the teacher deliberately rotates these group roles so that the entire team develops and adapts, the small group is probably moving beyond the structural-functional model to the final one considered by Mills.

The cybernetic-growth model is the most complete and includes an integration of the best features of the previous models. The emphasis leaves the survival of the group and shifts to the growth of the entire unit. This model looks at the primary role of feedback to the system, and sees the group as the agent for developing and responding to feedback. The feedback may be related to the goal of the group, to the structure of the group, or to the personal development of the individuals's sense of self.

A forensic team which is well-run can be seen as a laboratory for this perspective. Team members work together for the purpose of providing feedback to each other and for themselves. They most likely focus on the task demands dimension of feedback - critiques for example. The sessions where they critique each others' work is part of this process. While it may produce tension and conflict, the goal - improvement of the event -- usually overrides the conflict. Feedback on the goal behaviors also comes from coaching sessions, and especially in reacting to the ballots received at tournaments. One of the most interesting moments in any forensic team routine is the distribution, reading and reacting to the ballots from a just-completed tournament. Some teachers never return the ballots until the class meeting day after the tournament. Some return them instantly at the tournament site. Either choice will provide plenty of opportunity to watch small group interaction at work. The best reactions will usually involve an appraisal of the feedback in terms of what can be modified for the next competition. The control and change elements of the cybernetic growth model are clear in these behaviors.

Next, the feedback related to structure can also be seen. The changes needed in some debate team combinations are quick examples, but larger changes in the way the forensic group is structured may be ongoing elements of feedback. Jobs may need to be altered, or the personnel doing them may need to change their approaches, or entirely new personnel may be assigned to tasks. All of these changes come in response to feedback and are opportunities for the

forensic program to function as a laboratory experience in cybernetics and growth.

Finally, some self-awareness should be a product of the forensic small group experience. People get intense, direct and often immediate feedback on ego-involving issues. Watch any stressed debater reading an unflattering ballot comment, and you know that issues of "self" are operating. Individual events speakers invest much of themselves in creating and presenting their speeches and readings. Sometimes the feedback is not subtle or kind - students are advised, for example, to "give up on this high-school literature and find some quality material." If the material selected is not very challenging, the student has an opportunity to grow from this comment. More to the point of small group interactions, if fellow team members comment that the material in a poetry program isn't very interesting, or something they have all heard before, the group is providing direct feedback. Coupled with peer pressures which operate, the individual may then try to stretch their appreciation of poetry by seeking new material. Similarly, if the group norm is established that debaters are ready on the day of assigned practices, it becomes an opportunity for someone who procrastinates to see alternative models from peers, and perhaps develop new, timely behaviors.

Clearly, this model looks at different roles which small group members can play, it borrows the notion of growth from biological frameworks, it recognizes the place of conflict in promoting that growth, and how pressures to conform to a group norm can create

self-awareness. It recognizes three areas of feedback, including the relationship to the group structure. Forensic activities probably can be used as a laboratory for this perspective most appropriately because it is the most complete and integrated approach.

Conclusion

Obviously, this paper argues that forensics programs are laboratories for small group processes, whether they are explicitly recognized or not by either the participants or their teachers. Small group dynamics, as identified by Shaw, are present and clearly define the forensic activity as a small group. The combination of being a small group, spending extended amounts of time together, longitudinal requirements, the presence of a teacher probably trained in small group communication, and the focus of the activity on communication create a unique experience and setting for the forensics laboratory not found elsewhere. The six models offered by Mills provide ample illustrations of how common forensic teams practices can be easily incorporated into any of a number of small group perspectives. The cybernetic-growth model, because of its sophistication and completeness, would seem to be the best one to adopt for teachers who wish to make a conscientious decision to make their program a laboratory for small group communication.

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